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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000718

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTORAL REFORM CHATTER INCREASES IN JORDAN
FOLLOWING CABINET RESHUFFLE

REF: A. 08 AMMAN 3353
[1](#)B. 08 AMMAN 3002
[1](#)C. 08 AMMAN 1834

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Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Electoral reform, long the primary goal of reform politicians in Jordan, is a hot topic of discussion following a cabinet reshuffle on February 23. PM Nader Al-Dahabi has since declared his intention to put Jordan's controversial electoral law on the table for discussion or possible amendment. Meanwhile in parliament, the business-oriented Ikha bloc is preparing an electoral reform strategy in the hopes of making it the group's signature issue. While the talk may ultimately lead nowhere, the discussion is reaching higher levels than before -- an indication of the rising importance politicians and average Jordanians place on the issue. End Summary.

Winds of Change?

[1](#)2. (C) As currently formulated, Jordan's electoral law uses gerrymandering and disproportionate allocation of parliamentary seats to maximize representation of rural East Bankers at the expense of urban Palestinians. (Note: The rural, East Banker town of Karak has a representative in parliament for every 6,800 residents, while predominantly Palestinian Amman has a representative in parliament for every 11,000 residents. End Note.) Past efforts at electoral reform have been shut down by the same conservative politicians and government officials who benefit from the law (see refs A and B for the most recent examples). The legislation was implemented in 2001 without parliamentary approval as a provisional statute and as such can theoretically be placed on parliament's calendar at any time without prior approval from the government, which otherwise introduces all legislation (Ref C). The many critics of the law assert that it creates weak, unrepresentative parliaments that quash necessary reforms in favor of tribal interests. Pro-establishment politicians and officials quietly tell us that a fairer electoral law would result in significant gains for Palestinian-origin candidates and Islamists -- a situation they believe would negatively impact internal stability by allowing non-East Bankers a role in decision-making.

[1](#)3. (U) Following the February 23 reshuffle of the Dahabi cabinet, electoral reform has re-emerged as a public topic of discussion. During the first meeting of the new cabinet on February 24, PM Dahabi publicly declared his intention to "reconsider laws that regulate political life in Jordan." Government spokesman Nabil Al-Sharif and Minister for Political Development Musa Ma'aytah subsequently declared that the government would engage in a dialogue with civil

society, political parties, and other institutions about possible changes in Jordan's electoral law.

The Best Laid Plans

¶4. (C) Prior to the cabinet reshuffle, Legal Committee Chair Mubarak Abbadi told poloff that the Ikha bloc would make electoral reform its signature issue in 2009. (Note: Ikha is composed of around twenty young, business-oriented, primarily East Banker MPs who are cautiously pro-reform. End Note.) Ikha is planning to mount a campaign within the parliament to bring the electoral law forward to the parliament for revision and approval. Jordanian media recently reported an Ikha memo to lower house speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali asking him to put the electoral law on the agenda for an expected extraordinary session of parliament this summer. On March 4, lower house speaker Abdulhadi Majali rejected Ikha's request, telling mainstream daily Al-Ghad that the issue would require "extensive discussion" and was linked to the King's decentralization plan, which is still on the drawing board (Refs A and B).

¶5. (C) According to Abbadi, Ikha will propose amendments to the electoral law, which will result in "substantial improvement" without upsetting pro-establishment political groups. The bloc is looking at a mixed system of representation based on district and provincial representation, which would maintain current electoral districts but reduce their representation in parliament to one MP per district. In addition to voting for a candidate in the local district, voters would also cast a ballot for candidates in their governorate. The number of seats allocated to the twelve governorates would be based on population, meaning that representation of the Amman

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governate (and its largely Palestinian-origin population) would increase. (Note: In the current system, there are forty-five electoral districts in which each voter casts a ballot for one candidate in the voter's multi-member district. End Note.) Ikha's approach is designed to mollify East Bank conservatives by retaining elements of the current system while addressing the imbalance in representation for urban Jordanians, most of whom are Palestinian.

Comment

¶6. (C) The King's silence on electoral reform is largely interpreted by proponents and opponents of electoral change as approval of the system as it stands. Even so, the current round of talk about electoral reform shows that some of the political elite are looking for ways to engage practically on the issue. The Ikha effort is interesting in that it presents a proposal for debate. That being said, the proposal as it stands will likely be defeated by the establishment keen to protect its control over the levers of government as well as the conception of East Banker identity. Beecroft